

The Trouble With The Freedom Press Book About National Action



There is no mention of the militant anti-fascists who physically opposed the neo-Nazi group throughout their existence

National Action (NA) were the first far-right group to be banned under Britain's draconian counter-terrorism legislation, despite having committed no acts of terrorism. Their crime was to openly celebrate the murder of an MP. The political class wanted someone to pay the price for this murder and it ended up being NA. It was only after they were banned one of their members decided they were going to try to murder an MP because they'd been arrested for being a paedophile, which in retrospect makes NA's ban look like it was warranted.

The Trouble With National Action by academic Mark Hayes, recently published by Freedom Press, looks at NA's activity prior to the ban. The book is essentially an academic expert on the far-right closely reading NA's website and news articles about what the group did, then analysing what they've read and situating it in the political current from where it emerged. If you've not closely followed NA, there is a lot to be learnt from reading this book, especially if you're keen to understand how neo-Nazi thought has developed over the years.

But readers who closely followed NA, particularly active anti-fascists, will find the book disappointing. On the back of the book it's revealed that Hayes was a former member of Anti-Fascist Action, and at one point in the book Hayes actually links NA saying they were 'formed in the face of adversity, in hate of the red terror' to the successes of Anti-Fascist Action in forcing a change of strategy in the British National Party in the late 1990s. At no point does Hayes mention the Anti-Fascist Network (AFN), the militant anti-fascists who were actually involved in combating NA on the streets throughout their existence.

Given the book's central argument is that states should not ban far-right groups and they need to be combatted on the streets, it seems bizarre for the book to not even acknowledge the militant anti-fascists who physically opposed NA on multiple occasions. The absence of the AFN impacts Hayes' analysis: he presents NA as if they used a multi-faceted strategy rather than acknowledging the way the group developed as it expanded and then came into violent contact with militant anti-fascists.

The first encounter NA had with militant anti-fascists was in their very early days, in November 2013, when a handful of members tried to go on a Golden Dawn solidarity protest in London. The pub the fascists were drinking in before the protest was identified and a group of anti-fascists went in and confronted the far-right. The NA members were actually walked to a train station and left the area without being harmed as the assembled militants did not know who they were escorting away.

Initially NA's street activity was either flash mobs or attending other people's protests as an NA contingent. They wanted to carry out the classic fascist strategy of 'march and grow' but could only get around a dozen people out. They weren't able to organise their own marches because they just didn't have the numbers. But by repeatedly doing flash mobs, recording videos of them and posting them onto YouTube, they were able to grow. Had NA attempted to hold any of their own protests in their early days, once people were aware of their existence, they would have faced significant opposition from anti-fascists.

Although it should be noted, the AFN was heavily divided over how to respond to NA, some leading figures in the network felt NA were a joke and didn't need to be opposed, others took the neo-Nazi youth group far more seriously and felt they needed to be smashed. This actually meant that when NA eventually called their first public protest, the White Man March in Newcastle in March 2015, several AFN groups travelled to Newcastle, while the rest of the network travelled to London to join the annual Stand Up To Racism march which was being counter-protested by Britain First.

In Newcastle, a squad of around 30 predominantly young anti-fascists, mostly wearing black, walked across the city centre wondering why they were getting so little police attention. When they arrived at the bar opposite the train station which NA were drinking in, it was only when it kicked off that the sole police officer outside realised the group were anti-fascists. NA's tactic of copying the black bloc aesthetic didn't help them on this occasion. A group of three NA members, including Lawrence Burns from Cambridge and Will Stevens from Derby - then the main person behind NA's hardcore band, made the mistake of trying to walk through the group of anti-fascists to get into the bar.

Burns bizarrely bent in half and then ran wind-milling into the crowd of anti-fascists, without looking where he was going so went head first into an anti-fascists' knee before being beaten to the ground. Stevens ran down an alley way only to be chased by anti-fascists who opened his face up with an old trick learnt from comrades who used to be in AFA. He was last seen sat on the floor with blood pouring from his nose, being cared for by a worker from a nearby cafe with dreadlocks. He seemed to drop out of NA after this incident and their hardcore band never released another record - perhaps proof that militant anti-fascism works...

NA's first ever public protest had begun with several of them being hospitalised. Despite these attempts to disrupt their day, NA went ahead with a static protest held on the Quayside which was the largest explicitly neo-Nazi demonstration to be held in the UK for some time. They seemed to acknowledge militant anti-fascism as an occupational hazard, Yorkshire organiser Ashley Bell from Gartforth asked NA members to contact him so he could compile a report on the anti-fascist attack but the group was otherwise buoyed by having been able to hold their own protest with only a handful of arrests and hospital visits.

Having seen their first protest as a success, NA were keen to continue and another White Man March was organised for Liverpool in August 2015. This time the AFN collectively recognised something needed to be done and the entire network worked on organising a counter-protest. Despite having a reputation for being a 'red' city, the autonomous anti-fascist group in Liverpool had fallen apart following a sustained and violent campaign of harassment from the local far-right. Luckily it was through organising opposition to NA that Merseyside AFN were formed and they did a phenomenal job of mobilising locals.

In the week leading up to the protest someone sent a letter to the mayor claiming NA would organise race riots if their march was banned. If this was someone in NA it backfired spectacularly but it's widely suspected it was done by someone seeking to cause the backlash which happened. The letter was reported on by the Liverpool Echo who stoked the anti-fascist counter-protests. The AFN ensured they were sending press releases to the paper, which described them as "[Britain's largest anti-fascist organisation](#)" and included quotes from a network spokesperson who said: "We cannot rely on the state banning the neo-Nazi march to prevent it from happening, the people of Liverpool need to block the streets and prevent the march from taking place."

On the day itself the liberal organisation Unite Against Fascism (UAF) met at Lime Street station well before NA's march was due to start and then marched away from the station. As the AFN were driving into Liverpool they got a call from a fantasist who said there were 30 members of the far-right North West Infidels (NWI) waiting to attack the AFN as they formed up at the bombed-out church. As there were around 80 AFN activists in a convoy heading to the location it was decided to risk being attacked by the far-right, but the promised attack never came.

There were around 300 people on the AFN protest when it set off and marched towards Lime Street, where it was believed NA were meeting. As the march passed through the city it grew and by the time it reached the station it had more than doubled. Initially the group of NA spotted outside the lost luggage were believed to be on their way to meet a larger group of fascists and the AFN march left them in the station and headed to the Adelphi Hotel which is where it was believed NA were due to meet. But it turned out that other than the group in the station and another in the attached Wetherspoons, there were no other obvious groups of Nazis in the city.

The AFN march went back towards the station and then surrounded it. Anti-fascists flooded the concourse and surrounded the group of NA leaders while others held the streets outside. As various fascists attempted to join the group in the station they were physically confronted. The group in the station were pelted with anything people could find and had to take cover by hiding in the lost luggage office, somewhere people can go to ask if anything they have lost while travelling has been found and handed in. Some of the Nazis who had been drinking in the Wetherspoons attempted to escape only to be identified and chased. Ashley Bell proved to be too quick for the anti-fascists but his friend was knocked unconscious.

Fascists arriving outside the station were physically confronted and needed to be rescued by the police. Eventually the police pulled a riot van up outside the Wetherspoons and let the group of Nazis who had been drinking escape the city in it. Former activist in the neo-Nazi terrorist group Combat 18, Rob Gray from Stanwell, tried to sprint to the van with his gut flying all over the place. The group from the lost luggage were eventually taken out by the police and put on a train out of the city, after being pushed through the mob of anti-fascists. The crowd of anti-fascists was easily around 1,000 by this point and with no Nazis left in Lime Street word came that they had re-emerged at the city's waterfront. The crowd set off hoping to confront any Nazis they could find and then when none could be found, the partying began.

Channel 4's Friday night comedy show The Last Leg had actually hired a tuba player to follow NA as they marched, but they were unable to air that segment because the march never happened. Instead they spent the time they were going to use for that to mock NA for being unable to march and having to hide in the lost luggage. Videos of the 'Battle of Lime Street' went viral and millions of people suddenly became aware of NA and them having to cower from anti-fascists. While the attempts to stop the White Man March in Newcastle failed, in Liverpool they were a resounding success. NA never called another public protest and they had to return to flash mobs and attending other people's protests.

NA's return to Liverpool in February 2016 was initially advertised as a protest in Manchester, it was only revealed they were heading to Liverpool when they arrived on the steps of St George's Hall. They had

been forced to mobilise through encrypted messaging apps rather than publicly. Again they were blocked and stopped from marching by a large crowd of anti-fascists. The NA contingent clashed with riot police and were all arrested and taken out of the city, some of them were eventually jailed following the clashes.

While NA were on the whole, quite soft, they did have a handful of members with a capacity for violence. In April 2015 an NA squad was out during the annual 'March for England' organised by groups which had split from the anti-Muslim football hooligan organisation the English Defence League, in Blackpool, having been moved from Brighton where the march was regularly opposed by a large community mobilisation. The NA squad in Blackpool included MMA trainer and gym owner Jimmy Hay, MMA fighter Chris Kennedy and White Man March organiser Wayne Bell. Bell was a welder and kept an array of self-made weapons at his home. Several of this same group travelled to Dover in January 2016 where there was five hours of street fighting between anti-fascists and the far-right. That day ended a score draw, but was widely seen as a success by the far-right, who had broken the anti-fascist blockade and then rampaged through Dover. But this was only a minority of NA members. NA was actually split over going to Dover, with the majority, who were overwhelmingly weak and incapable of violence, fearing it would be a repeat of Liverpool so they went to the London Forum meeting on the same day instead.

Following Dover and the February return to Liverpool, the state repression of the far-right significantly increased. Scores of far-right activists were jailed for acts of violence and far-right street activity went into decline as campaigning in the EU referendum began. This effectively marked the end of a phase of vicious and brutal struggle between anti-fascists and the far-right.

Viewing NA through their own publications and media reports, or the output of counter-extremism bodies doesn't tell their full story. Hayes' book analyses the most public aspects of NA but only offers a glimpse at what really happened. Omitting the AFN and its significant role in the struggle against NA does a disservice to anti-fascists everywhere. In particular it does a disservice to the anarchists who have been the mainstay of militant anti-fascism in the UK since AFA was disbanded. Anarchists are the only political tendency who have made a continuous contribution to militant anti-fascism over the past two decades, which is something the movement's publishers wouldn't be amiss to remember.

[The Trouble With National Action](#) is available from Freedom Press.